

**"IMPROVING ACCESS TO POST-SECONDARY
EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES"**

**SUBMITTED TO THE

COMMISSION ON
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION
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FROM THE:

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE PREMIER'S COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF DISABLED PERSONS

Who are we?

The Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons is a body for consultation and study that was created to advise the provincial government on matters relating to the status of persons with disabilities. The Council reports directly to the Premier of the Province.

Responsibilities

The Act governing the Premier's Council states that the Council shall advise the Minister on matters relating to the status of persons with disabilities; shall bring before the government and the public matters of interest and concern to persons with disabilities; shall promote prevention of disabling conditions; shall promote employment opportunities of persons with disabilities; and shall promote access by persons with disabilities to all services offered to the citizens of New Brunswick.

Structure

The Council consists of a Chairperson and twelve other members appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor in Council. Provisions in the Act guarantee representation by regions, agencies working on behalf of persons with disabilities and the public at large.

Activities

To carry out its functions, the Council will receive briefs and suggestions from individuals and groups concerning the status of persons with disabilities; undertake research on matters relating to persons with disabilities; recommend programs concerning the status of persons with disabilities; make referrals to and consult and collaborate with universities and individuals on matters which affect persons with disabilities; propose legislation, studies and recommendations as the Council considers necessary; appoint special committees when needed; maintain an information library on subjects related to persons with disabilities and on any services/programs likely to be of interest to persons with disabilities; and offer advice and/or intervention in cases where persons with disabilities are having difficulties in gaining access to needed services.

INTRODUCTION

We believe that few would argue with the potential benefits for individuals who have access to quality post-secondary educational opportunities and successfully complete their studies at a higher level.

Along with the academic curriculum and exposure to current and emerging technologies, students develop important social skills and engage in networking which could have a dramatic impact on their future lives.

Studies have consistently shown that graduates from post-secondary training will usually expect to enjoy significant economic advantages during their employment years. This in turn improves their capacity to enjoy a higher standard of living including into their retirement years.

With the emphasis on information technologies and communications, it is even more important to make the investment in post-secondary education. The job market is very demanding and applicants must have the required skills.

Persons with disabilities face barriers created by real limitations of their disability, or from the negative stereotyping and potential discrimination in the workplace. Education is even more critical if they hope to succeed in finding and keeping meaningful employment.

While some progress has been made in terms of more persons with disabilities going on to post-secondary education, we note that the issues and solutions offered in this submission are unfortunately very similar to a paper we prepared on this same topic in September 2000. We still have a long way to go.

We would like to raise some issues that should be addressed to ensure fair access to post-secondary education for students with disabilities that also include all of the matters of concern to students without disabilities. **This list should not be considered an exclusive summary and the points are not necessarily in order of priority:**

ISSUES

- The number of students with disabilities represented in our inclusive public school system has been growing but not enough students with disabilities are being adequately supported to continue to the post-secondary level.
- Many universities, community colleges and other training facilities are not fully barrier-free in terms of physical access to their buildings and classrooms. All facilities eligible for students receiving student aid should be required to report on their status for physical accessibility and how they plan to correct problems in the future. Universities and community colleges should reserve a portion of their regular maintenance and capital budgets to address gaps in barrier-free facilities.
- Students with disabilities often face delays in getting funding approved for support services even when funding is available. TESS (Training and Employment Support Services for Persons with Disabilities) funds from the Department of Post-Secondary, Education, Training and Labour will want to wait to see if the Study Grant from Student Loan will pay first and vice-versa. This is "**the payer of last resort" syndrome**. Who should be the payer of first resort? Some students miss a full year, as they could not confirm funding especially if they are accepted in the late summer.
- Students with disabilities may not be given adequate encouragement and current information to consider options for post-secondary education. Changes in demographics indicate the opportunity to hire more workers with disabilities if they have marketable skills. Many guidance counsellors are not really familiar with the trades and community colleges compared to the programs offered at universities where they were trained.
- Some students with disabilities could benefit from talking to disability peers and potential role models while still in the public school system. They need the confidence to try new experiences in new environments where they may have to rely on new support networks. Parents may need some counselling on how to help their child with a disability develop more independent living skills and how to make good decisions. Links with local disability groups could help more effectively if established while the student is still in public school.

- Students should be given credit for prior work or learning experiences including volunteer work when they apply for admission to post-secondary educational institutions.
- Many students with disabilities and their families are not given adequate information on sources of financial support and how and when to apply. Our Premier's Council website has a special directory on this. The same information has to be available in print and alternate formats for those individuals who do not have ready access to the Internet outside of school.
- Many students with disabilities come from low income families and can lose income and health benefits while a student. They also fear a large debt load when they graduate and cannot find a good job. More financial supports are needed for competent low income students.
- Some students with disabilities will need support services due to their disability such as attendant care, note takers, sign language interpreters, adapted equipment, Braille books, tapes, etc... Which services should come with the student and which services should be provided by the educational facility?
- Students with disabilities should be treated as individuals in considering career options and training needs. Not all blind persons want to be piano tuners. Not all wheelchair operators want to work with computers and not all persons with intellectual disabilities want to be chambermaids. Look at the individual's strengths and interests and then figure out how to accommodate the disability if needed. Do not focus on a diagnosis or label first. More students with disabilities should have work exposure and job shadowing opportunities while still attending the public school system. The government needs to address employers' concerns over safety and liability issues.
- Instructors or professors may have little experience or training that has specifically prepared them to meet the needs of certain types of disabilities. They must be willing to adapt and to ask for help from the student and other resources on how to be fair in meeting such needs. Materials and resource people are available but not always called upon and actively used.

- Affordable and accessible housing can be difficult to find in a new community if one has to relocate to pursue studies. Housing offices and student services should include basic questions on accessibility for landlords listing with them to attract student tenants.
- Student Services at each facility should maintain information on local resources such as accessible transportation, accessible recreation facilities, advocates and service providers etc... who could respond to disability issues.
- Policies relating to social assistance and health benefits should be adjusted to support easier transitions to post-secondary education and then to employment. Disability specific benefits should be more flexible to encourage risk taking and/or to allow return to benefits if a job ends on short notice. For example, they may lose their health card after a transition period but the employer may not have a health benefits plan to replace coverage provided on social assistance. Also the rates are higher for persons with disabilities not considered employable. If they get a job and then go back on benefits later, it may be at a lower rate of monthly social assistance.
- Some students are having to wait long periods to get appointments with professionals for assessments or formal verification of disability or prescriptions for equipment etc... in order to obtain approval for funding or to be able to access support services required to accommodate their disability. Persons with permanent disabilities should not have to get another doctor's note each time they deal with another service provider to state the same information already available. Consumers should be given copies of health professional reports, rehabilitation assessments and educational plans so they can share the material if needed with others who require the same information.
- Planning for the next steps in the transition from public school to post-secondary education for students with disabilities must not wait for high school graduation to begin. They need to make some choices with good advice and then participate in the arrangements to prepare for those goals. Confirmation of necessary support services should not be assumed or delayed until classes start or they may not have what they need at the post-secondary institution. Cooperative education programs can provide options to try out careers before final plans are made by the student.

- Certain disabilities in particular are not well understood by the public and instructors. While most people would recognize a wheelchair user or person who is blind, they would not respond to hidden disabilities. How can they better meet the needs of brain injury survivors, learning disabilities, chronic mental health problems, chronic fatigue, chemical sensitivities, etc? Students can be accused of being lazy, uncooperative, and not interested in their studies when the real deficit is lack of proper teaching approaches and supports that can get around the disabilities.
- New Brunswick should continue the Deaf Literacy educational program to address the needs of Deaf adults who have completed high school but are not ready to take the academic program at the post-secondary level. They need to be able to function in their Deaf world of contacts as well as having the necessary social and communication skills to function in the hearing world. The Deaf Literacy Pilot Programs in Bathurst and Saint John Community Colleges should be continued and perhaps expanded to other campuses where the members can justify it. The Deaf Literacy program is taught by a Deaf Instructor using sign language supported by another instructor who also uses sign language.
- Students graduating from public school should have basic literacy and numeracy skills required for admission to post-secondary schools. Unfortunately, some students with disabilities have coasted through the system and are not prepared. Other individuals who acquire a disability through injury or illness later in life may wish to return to school for retraining for a new career but do not have academic requirements. We need to ensure that more literacy and academic upgrading programs are able to meet the accessibility and support needs of such persons with disabilities who wish to take such programs as a stepping stone to post-secondary education.
- The public school system needs to sit down with community stakeholders to address future directions for services for deaf or blind students to respond to the very difficult communication issues related to these two disabilities. Why is the approach to services so different between the anglophone and francophone systems? Are these students really ready for post-secondary education? Should Braille be taught in the public schools? Should sign language be an optional course for non-disabled students?

- The costs of support services and adapted rehabilitation equipment can be expensive for students with higher levels of disability. It is ironic that students who need the most assistance will usually have the most difficulty getting disability programs to approve supports. Who should decide what is a realistic goal for any particular person with a disability who requires financial costs to achieve that goal?

CONCLUSION

There have been a number of individuals with significant disabilities who have been successful at post-secondary education. However, we are convinced that the current enrollments do not adequately reflect the potential numbers from individuals with disabilities who could benefit from such experiences.

Financial stress, unclear labour market predictions, inadequate career counselling, poor coordination of transitional planning, lack of social skills, low expectations, fragmented support services and limited interest from the post-secondary sector are just some of the barriers faced by students with disabilities.

We think that the various stakeholders in education, disability advocate groups and others need to get together to map out a strategic response to address these issues in a systemic way.

Outcome measurements need to be established to monitor how many students with disabilities are completing high school and going on to post-secondary education. That information can then be linked to future labour market surveys to measure rates of employment and income levels for persons with disabilities. Over a period of time, we should be able to achieve improvements compared to the mediocre results to date. The Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons would welcome the opportunity to be part of that process.

